

Theologian struggled with courage vs. conscience

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Special for USA TODAY

In July 1939, a 33-year-old German theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer left a comfortable teaching post in America for his troubled homeland. The fateful decision ultimately would land him in history books as the clergyman who tried to kill Adolf Hitler.

His story, recalled widely at events honoring the centenary of his birthday Feb. 4, leads from his post as a double agent inside the Third Reich to the concentration camp at Flossenbürg where the Nazis hanged him and his co-conspirators.

Thanks in part to his dramatic story, Bonhoeffer is now the subject of about a dozen films and documentaries, including *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, which airs this coming week on PBS (check local listings).

Yet his greatest drama, according to those who are inspired by his legacy, may have transpired inside this man who struggled with the moral implications of taking another man's life — even Hitler's.

"He found himself confronted by the Anti-christ" in the Hitler regime, says the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor in chief of *First Things*, a journal of religion and public life.

Although Bonhoeffer ultimately believed "he was doing the right thing (in the murder conspiracy), he did feel deeply torn and did at times evidence a sense of profound moral ambiguity."

Bonhoeffer sought to master the ways of God and morality from an early age. His psychiatrist father had him reading Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* while he was a teenager. At 21, he presented his doctoral thesis on the nature of the church, a text the renowned theologian Karl Barth called "a theological miracle."

When Bonhoeffer died at age 39, his writings covered 10,000 pages, most of which would not emerge in print until years later.

The young Lutheran pastor/scholar soon found his convictions tested by Nazism. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer

promptly took to radio airwaves to warn against the dangers of serving an immoral leader and joined the Confessing Church, a Christian resistance movement. He quietly taught German students to reject Nazism until 1939; he then left for Union Theological Seminary in New York, but he returned within a month.

"I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America," he wrote. "I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the trials of this time with my people."

Bonhoeffer used family connections to gain a post in the military intelligence unit, where he operated as a double agent. There he helped arrange for a bomb to explode at the Führer's headquarters on July 20, 1944. But Hitler was only wounded, and Bonhoeffer, 38 and engaged to be married, was among the dozens arrested. He was hanged April 9, 1945, just days before American troops liberated Flossenbürg.

To many, Bonhoeffer's name is synonymous with moral courage and with the importance of thinking deeply about right and wrong.

"He's really held up a model of moral seriousness with painstaking deliberation," says Thomas Massaro, a moral theologian at Weston Jesuit Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Mass. "That's his legacy."

Americans sharply disagree, however, on what meaning Bonhoeffer's defiance holds for present times.

James Dobson, founder of the non-profit Focus on the Family, whose mission is to "preserve traditional values and the institution of the family," has invoked Bonhoeffer as a rallying cry for anti-abortion evangelicals to stay involved in politics.

When Neuhaus reads Bonhoeffer, he hears a principled stand against euthanasia, against homosexuality and for a theory that says war is morally justified in certain cases.

Others strongly reject such interpretations of a man whose resistance to fascism has inspired generations.

Wayne Floyd, former general editor of the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, argues that Bonhoeffer denounced only systemic, Nazi-perpetrated euthanasia and forced abortions. Among pacifists, who believe violence is never justified, Bonhoeffer remains a hero thanks to the recorded turmoil of his conscience.

"I understand him as (having been) a pacifist," says Dean Johnson, director of the Plowshares Program to encourage peace studies at Indiana's Goshen College, a Mennonite school. "It has been hard to reconcile his assassination attempt on Hitler, but I don't think he saw a way out of that."

For some Jews, Bonhoeffer is a mixed bag. During his early years, Bonhoeffer held that Jews would attain righteousness with God only by converting to Christianity. In some circles, that conviction now casts a shadow over his heroism. For example, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust museum, continues to deny Bonhoeffer standing among the "Righteous Gentiles" despite intense lobbying in recent years.

Not all of Bonhoeffer's legacy is mired in dispute or controversy. At St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., pastor Scott Kershner reads Bonhoeffer regularly as one who "was a pastor, first and foremost."

For Bonhoeffer, ministry began with repentance. He writes in *Life Together*, "How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own?" Bonhoeffer's wisdom helped Kershner stay focused, he recalls, when a parishioner more than 50 years his senior confessed she had fallen in love with him during her preparation for baptism.

"He really guided me through those tricky pastoral waters," Kershner says. "He gave me the courage to stay in that pastoral space."

To filmmaker Martin Doblmeier, his appeal as a subject lies largely in his authenticity. "His writings are backed up by what he did with his life," Doblmeier says. "In our country, so many people have seen hypocrisy in religion. Bonhoeffer has none of that. People can relate to him."

For Bonhoeffer, being authentic meant facing death as destiny. His most famous line highlights the sacrifices required in Christian life: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

His final act was to celebrate Communion with some fellow prisoners.

Witnesses reported his final words.

"This is the end for me, the beginning of life."